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ABSTRACT

This study used a double method approach to examine Quebec kindergarten and elementary school teachers' beliefs about grade retention. The research combined a quantitative approach, in which 227 teachers responded to a questionnaire, with a qualitative study of a selected sub-sample of 12 teachers holding opposite beliefs about grade retention. Analysis of the questionnaire data indicated that teachers at all grade levels believed that retention was an acceptable school practice and an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next higher grade. Most teachers believed that retention did not harm students' self-concept, though they were not sure about this effect on students in higher grades. The interviews offered an explanation of the persistence of teachers' beliefs about retention. The results found that beliefs were rooted in the culture of the school curriculum. Those who believed in retention felt that schools should reach the goal of instruction rather than global development of all students. They believed that programs should remain the same for all students, and groups of students should be formed homogeneously. They had a tendency to use summative rather than formative evaluation. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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A DOUBLE METHOD APPROACH FOR A DOUBLE NEED: TO DESCRIBE TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT GRADE RETENTION, AND TO EXPLAIN THE PERSISTENCE OF THESE BELIEFS

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A DOUBLE METHOD APPROACH FOR A DOUBLE NEED: TO DESCRIBE TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT GRADE RETENTION, AND TO EXPLAIN THE PERSISTENCE OF THESE BELIEFS

ABSTRACT

A double method approach was used to examine kindergarten and elementary teachers' beliefs about grade retention. This research combined a quantitative approach in which 227 teachers responded to a questionnaire, with a qualitative study of a purposively selected sub-sample of twelve teachers holding opposite beliefs about grade retention. Questionnaire responses indicated that teachers believe retention is an acceptable school practice. Interviews offered an explanation of the persistence of teachers' beliefs in revealing how believes about retention are rooted in the culture of the school curriculum. In order to affect teachers' beliefs, this paper encourages researchers to design collaborative studies with teachers to examine their beliefs and enable them to reflect on educational practices.

PROBLEM

"Where is the research community organized to argue with citizens in thousands of local school districts that the practice of retention in grade is almost always wrong—educationally, socially, and fiscally? " (Goodlad, 1997). With AERA Past President John I. Goodlad, don't we believe in the need to increase the status and use of educational research?

There is a discrepancy between what research says about the efficacy of retention and widely held beliefs of educators, particularly teachers who are greatly involved in the process of evaluation. Although the weight of empirical evidence argues against grade retention, teachers often suggest retention in grade as a remedy for academic failure.

In Quebec, year after year, elementary teachers continue to retain about 5% of their students, feeling that another year to grow will be beneficial. These teachers do not seem to believe that retaining students is absolutely contrary to the best research evidence (House, 1989).

While our research community publishes an incredible body of knowledge of high relevance to educational practice, criticism of educational research and statements regarding its unworthiness are commonplace among large numbers of educators, including teachers. Beliefs teachers hold can influence how receptive teachers are to ideas they might encounter from research (Kennedy 1997). Along with scientific publications, beliefs teachers hold have an effect on their educational practice. The study of teachers beliefs is highly relevant to our research community. According to Pajares (1992), the beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgements, which, in turn, affect their behavior in the classroom.

OBJECTIVES

Describing teachers' beliefs about grade retention offers a useful glimpse, but understanding their connections with a context can provide an explanation of the persistence of these beliefs. Teachers' beliefs about grade retention are connected to a broader belief system: the school curriculum. Here is our double need: to describe teachers' beliefs, not only about grade retention, but also about the school curriculum, and to explain the persistence of these beliefs. Here are five research questions:

- What do kindergarten and elementary teachers believe regarding grade retention?

- What professional characteristics are shared by teachers who are mainly for or against grade retention?

- What beliefs teachers who are mainly for or against grade retention hold about the school curriculum?

- Can we draw a comparison between teachers' beliefs according to their opposite views for or against grade retention?

- What can explain the persistence of teachers' beliefs about grade retention?

The present paper brings brief answers to these questions. Exhaustive explanations are offered in my doctoral thesis (Pouliot, 1998).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Mainly in the United States, considerable research has been conducted over several decades relative to the effects of grade retention. Among the most important, Laurrie A. Shepard and Mary Lee Smith published a collection of scientific papers : *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention* (1989). Two meta-analysis presented by Jackson (1975) and by Homes and Matthews (1984) are authorities in this field. Recently, In Europe, Crahay (1996) presented an important study on grade retention *Peut-on lutter contre l'échec scolaire?* Although the preponderance of research suggests retention to be negative and often harmful to pupils, this practice is maintained.

Two central concepts are described: the concept of belief (Rokeach, 1968) and the concept of curriculum (Isambert-Jamati, 1990) in which beliefs are rooted. According to Rokeach (1968), "A belief is any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does...". The concept of curriculum refers to educational goals, programs, school

organisation, and their underlying ideas about learning, teaching and evaluation.

Certain types of beliefs are found to be much more resistant to change, and they tend to be the beliefs teachers rely on when they retain students (Kennedy, 1997). Among the most enduring beliefs, Rokeach (1968) mentions primitive beliefs learned by direct encounter with the object of beliefs, often built up in childhood. These beliefs are reinforced by a social consensus ant they are taken-for-granted.

While the expression "encounter with the object of beliefs" brings the researcher to explore teacher's beliefs through the expression of their personal and professional school experiences, the school curriculum is considered to be a social consensus and beliefs that are taken-for-granted become subjects of controversy.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

The prime consideration is to choose the appropriate techniques to answer five research questions. A double method approach offering two different techniques has been used. First, a written questionnaire using Likert-scaled items focussing on teachers' beliefs about grade retention has been sent to 300 schoolteachers in the province of Quebec. This questionnaire is a translation and an adaptation of the TRBQ used in a doctoral research by Ellen Menaker Tomchin (Teacher's Beliefs About Grade Retention, 1987). Then, semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 teachers selected according to their opposite strong beliefs, as measured in the previous method, widened the

scope to study the educational context of their beliefs about the school curriculum.

Quantitative research and qualitative research are not competing views in which reality is studied; these who traditions are complementary (Bryman, 1988). A double method has been useful because traditional belief inventories provided necessary, but limited information with which to make inferences. An additional qualitative analysis of teachers' verbal expression related to the context-specific nature of beliefs offered richer inferences. Quantitative research has been used first and it provided an aid to the selection of a sub-sample of twelve teachers holding opposite beliefs about grade retention.

The data from the written questionnaire has been analysed using the program Statview to perform different statistic tests. The data from the interviews has been analysed following a procedure called "Analyse par théorisation ancrée" developped by Dr. Pierre Paille (1994, Universite de Sherbrooke). This qualitative process is based on *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and on *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The first method provided a description of teachers' beliefs about perceived consequences of retention on academic results, personal adjustment and goals such as effort and merit. As in other studies conducted mainly in the United States and in Europe (Crahay, 1996; Manley, 1987; Peterson, 1989; Seastrand, 1993; Smith, 1989; Tomchin, 1989), Quebecois teachers who participated in this research strongly believe that retention has beneficial

effects on students. Since Tomchin (1989) has used a similar questionnaire, it is possible to draw a comparison between the beliefs of participants from Virginia and from Quebec. The measure of their beliefs is about the same, except regarding the dimension related to goals such as effort and merit. Quebecois participants don't believe as much as Virginia teachers that students who make passing grades, but are working below grade level should be retained. This result may reflect a prescription of the Ministry of Education in Quebec specifying that assessment, not effort or merit, shall guide the decision to retain a student.

Questionnaire responses indicated that teachers at all grade levels believe that retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next higher grade. The majority of teachers believe retention does not harm the child's self-concept, but they are not so sure about this effect on students in higher grades.

Teachers believe that retention is an acceptable school practice. Teachers reached consensus (more than two-thirds indicated the same response) on 20 of the 24 items listed below.

Results of Teacher Retention Beliefs Questionnaire (Pouliot 1998)

Item	Grades Taught	Teacher response: Agree	Disagree	M	SD	N
1. Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next higher grade.		81.2%	18.8%	2.0	.74	229
	K	(90%)	(10%)			
	1-3	(82%)	(18%)			
	4-6	(79%)	(21%)			
2. Retention is necessary for maintaining grade level standards.		71.9%	28.1%	2.1	.84	228
	K	(66%)	(34%)			
	1-3	(74%)	(26%)			
	4-6	(74%)	(26%)			

Results of Teacher Retention Beliefs Questionnaire (Pouliot 1998)

Item	Grades Taught	Teacher response: Agree	Disagree	M	SD	N
3. Retaining a child at the kindergarten harms the child's self- concept.		21.7%	78.3%	3.0	.87	230
	K	(10%)	(90%)			
	1-3	(19%)	(81%)			
	4-6	(25%)	(75%)			
4. Retaining a child in grades 1-3 harms the child's Self-concept.		21%	79%	3.0	.84	229
	K	(17%)	(83%)			
	1-3	(19%)	(81%)			
	4-6	(22%)	(78%)			
5. Retaining a child in grades 4-6 harms the child's Self-concept.		48.3%	51.7%	2.5	.84	227
	K	(52%)	(48%)			
	1-3	(55%)	(45%)			
	4-6	(38%)	(62%)			
6. Retention prevents classrooms from having wide ranges in student achievement.		78.4%	21.6%	2.0	.83	226
	K	(90%)	(10%)			
	1-3	(74%)	(26%)			
	4-6	(82%)	(18%)			
7. Students who do not apply themselves to their studies should be retained.		15.9%	84.1%	3.2	.78	227
	K	(10%)	(90%)			
	1-3	(13%)	(87%)			
	4-6	(21%)	(79%)			
8. Knowing that retention is a possibility does motivate students to work harder.		57.1%	42.9%	2.4	.83	226
	K	(34%)	(66%)			
	1-3	(55%)	(45%)			
	4-6	(70%)	(30%)			
9. Retention is an effective means of providing support in school for the child who does not get support at home.		29.8%	70.2%	3.0	.84	228
	K	(21%)	(79%)			
	1-3	(32%)	(68%)			
	4-6	(29%)	(71%)			
10. Students who do not make passing grades in 2 of the 3 major subject areas (reading, communications, or math) should be retained.		89.9%	10.1%	1.7	.67	227
	K	(83%)	(17%)			
	1-3	(93%)	(7%)			
	4-6	(91%)	(9%)			
11. Students who make passing grades, but are working below level, should be retained.		6.1%	93.9%	3.5	.70	230
	K	(0%)	(100%)			
	1-3	(11%)	(89%)			
	4-6	(3%)	(97%)			
12. Retention at the kindergarten is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.		74.2%	25.8%	2.0	.83	229
	K	(90%)	(10%)			
	1-3	(76%)	(24%)			
	4-6	(70%)	(30%)			

Results of Teacher Retention Beliefs Questionnaire (Pouliot 1998)

Item	Grades Taught	Teacher response: Agree	Disagree	M	SD	N
13. Retention in grades 1-3 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.		75.9%	24.1%	2.0	.73	228
	K	(66%)	(34%)			
	1-3	(80%)	(20%)			
	4-6	(76%)	(24%)			
14. Retention in grades 4-6 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.		49.8%	50.2%	2.5	.81	229
	K	(52%)	(48%)			
	1-3	(47%)	(53%)			
	4-6	(53%)	(47%)			
15. Students receiving services of a learning disabilities teacher should not be retained.		24.9%	75.1%	3.0	.84	229
	K	(28%)	(72%)			
	1-3	(20%)	(80%)			
	4-6	(28%)	(72%)			
16. If students are to be retained, they should be retained no later than third grade.		78.5%	21.5%	1.8	.88	228
	K	(86%)	(14%)			
	1-3	(80%)	(20%)			
	4-6	(76%)	(24%)			
17. At the kindergarten, overage children (more than a year older than their classmates) cause more behavior problems than other children.		16.9%	83.1%	3.1	.72	225
	K	(7%)	(93%)			
	1-3	(14%)	(86%)			
	4-6	(22%)	(78%)			
18. In grades 1-3, overage children (more than a year older than their classmates) cause more behavior problems than other children.		20.4%	79.6%	3.0	.78	226
	K	(14%)	(86%)			
	1-3	(17%)	(83%)			
	4-6	(25%)	(75%)			
19. In grades 4-6, overage children (more than a year older than their classmates) cause more behavior problems than other children.		43.4%	56.6%	2.7	.90	228
	K	(41%)	(59%)			
	1-3	(46%)	(54%)			
	4-6	(40%)	(60%)			
20. Retention at the kindergarten permanently labels a child.		12.7%	87.3%	3.3	.80	229
	K	(7%)	(93%)			
	1-3	(8%)	(92%)			
	4-6	(17%)	(83%)			
21. Retention in grades 1-3 permanently labels a child.		10.9%	89.1%	3.3	.72	230
	K	(10%)	(90%)			
	1-3	(7%)	(93%)			
	4-6	(13%)	(87%)			
22. Retention in grades 4-6 permanently labels a child.		24.3%	75.7%	3.0	.84	230
	K	(31%)	(69%)			
	1-3	(26%)	(74%)			

Results of Teacher Retention Beliefs Questionnaire (Pouliot 1998)

Item	Grades Taught	Teacher response Agree	Disagree	M	SD	N
	4-6	(20%)	(80%)			
23. Children who have passing grades but excessive absences should be retained.		4.4%	95.6%	3.6	.62	228
	K	(3%)	(97%)			
	1-3	(6%)	(94%)			
	4-6	(3%)	(97%)			
24. Children should never be retained.		8.3%	91.7%	3.5	.71	228
	K	(7%)	(93%)			
	1-3	(5%)	(95%)			
	4-6	(10%)	(90%)			

Although, it is not possible to generalise the results to the whole population of Quebecois teachers, participants who had acquired some knowledge about scientific research on retention significantly ($p<.05$) doubt that students can benefit from retention.

The second method enlightens our understanding and provides an explanation of the persistence of teachers' beliefs. A comparison between the data from six teachers who strongly believe that retention is a good mean to help students and six teachers holding opposite views reveals specific traits shared by each group regarding their educational beliefs related to the curriculum. Those who favour retention believe that schools should reach the goal of instruction instead of global development of students. They believe that programs shall remain the same for all students instead of proposing certain adaptations. They don't think they can modify the school organization. They believe that in order to be able to learn, a student must master basic skills first. They believe that groups of students should be formed according to homogeneous abilities. Finally, they have a tendency to use mainly the sommative aspect of evaluation instead of its formative aspect.

The more a belief is related to other beliefs, the more it is enduring. Teachers' beliefs about retention are connected to different views concerning the curriculum. In order to affect teachers' beliefs about retention, it is necessary to inform teachers about educational research relative to the effects of grade retention. It is also important to work on different aspects of their beliefs regarding the school curriculum.

On the threshold of the 21st century, promoting the use of educational knowledge in educational decision making, especially at the local level, among teachers, is an imperious challenge. To do so, educational researchers shall increase their contacts with teachers in order to encourage them to reconsider their beliefs about grade retention and about the school curriculum.

The practice of retaining students is rooted in the culture of our school curriculum. Teachers in collaboration with educational researchers should reexamine not only their beliefs about grade retention, but also reflect on their own schooling, teaching experience and educational goals. In doing so, teachers can clarify their beliefs and ensure that practice is grounded in educational research. Researchers shall increase their contacts with teachers, encouraging them to reconsider their beliefs and doing so, they can pave the way for change.

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